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ABSTRACT

As part of the evaluation of the College of Education at the University of Tennessee, an annual survey is conducted to obtain principals' ratings of graduates who are certified beginning teachers. This survey has enjoyed a response rate in excess of 90 percent. The survey is conducted by mail, with one mail followup, and occasional telephone followups. The first step is to identify the specific school locations of the teaching graduates. Then the survey forms and cover letters are mailed to the principals. One followup letter and another copy of the questionnaire are sent to those 15 to 29 percent who have not responded after four weeks. Telephone calls are also made, but such calls have not exceeded three in any of the three years discussed. Five different introductory cover letters are used, as well as personal individualized letters when indicated. Return envelopes are provided, and the letters are prepared on high quality letterhead stationery. These procedures are satisfactory in producing a high response rate. The three-page questionnaire, which is appended, includes demographic information, a rating scale of teacher effectiveness, and a check list of factors which influenced the principal to hire this teacher. (GDC)

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A Consistently Successful Follow-up Survey

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A Consistently Successful Follow-up Survey

In doing a survey one major objective is to achieve a high response rate so that the researcher can feel the data are representative and not subject to nonresponse bias. The survey that is being described is considered a success from this standpoint because it has generated response rates in excess of 90% each time it has been conducted during each of the past three years. In addition, these response rates were produced using a mail survey with one mail follow-up and, in a very few instances, a telephone follow-up.

It has not been possible to identify any one feature or procedure as being responsible for the high response rate. With a satisfactory result there has been no interest in randomly assigning half of those surveyed to a control group which might possibly achieve less positive results or in varying the procedures used. This is most accurately a case study or a careful description of the procedures used.

Some of the procedures used are typical of Dillman's Total Design Method (1978), but others are not. Some are among those identified by Altschuld and Lower (1984) as elements contributing to their high return rate when they surveyed school personnel regarding perceptions and attitudes toward evaluation of teaching in general. Some of the procedures are also consistent with recent research on response rates (Baumgartner & Heberlein, 1984; Yu & Cooper, 1983).

Purpose

The purpose of the annual survey was to obtain ratings of the performance of graduates of the College of Education from principals of public schools

in the state under whose supervision they worked during the year following graduation. The survey is part of the on-going program evaluation efforts of the College of Education. It has been conducted using the procedures described herein for the past three years. This is in no way intended to be an evaluation of individuals (graduates) or of the schools or school systems in which they are employed. This survey provides data to supplement that resulting from surveying a stratified (by college major) random sample of all graduates each fall to gain demographic and employment information and for purposes of program evaluation.

Procedures

Identifying the Population

The first step in the process is to locate graduates who were teaching. Using their computerized records, the State Department of Education is able to: 1. identify those teachers who have graduated from the institution and who have received certification during the specified time period (certification is granted only upon completion of degree and meeting certification requirements) which begins just after the graduation date of fall quarter and continues until just prior to the graduation date of the fall quarter of the following year; 2. locate the public school systems in which any of those teachers are reported as employed on the fall reports filed by all public school systems in the state. Checking the list thus prepared by the State Department of Education against University graduation lists makes it possible to delete from the list any teachers who have received initial certification during the specified time period but who have been postbaccalaureate students or who have returned only to complete coursework for teaching after receiving a degree elsewhere.

From 90 to 100 graduates were teaching in 36 to 38 public schools within the state in the fall following their graduation. The city school system and the county school system in the county in which the University is located employed from 29% to 34% of those teaching graduates.

Timelines

The first step of the process, requesting the list from the State Department of Education, is initiated in late January. The information is not ordinarily available any earlier because of the time involved in updating the computer records each year. When the listing of teachers by school systems is received, a letter is sent to the two local school systems (which employ the largest numbers of graduates), requesting specific school assignments for those teachers in their respective systems. Both school systems have been very cooperative in supplying the names of specific schools to which each of the teachers employed by them has been assigned. Accompanying the request letter and the list of teachers from their system is a copy of the questionnaire which will be sent to the principals in the system. The request for school assignments is usually made in late February or early March, as soon as the information is received from the State Department of Education.

The survey forms and cover letters are sent in early or mid-April (April 10-19). If Easter occurs in early April, the surveys are not sent until after the schools are back in session. One follow-up letter and another copy of the questionnaire are sent after approximately four weeks to those who have not responded. Since some school systems conclude the school year before the end of May it is important that the follow-up arrive at least one week before schools close. In the case of the local city and county systems in which questionnaires are sent directly to the principals, it is possible to initiate a telephone call if a response has still not been received

after the follow-up mailing. Such calls have not exceeded three in any of the three years which form the basis of this paper.

Personalization

A variety of cover letters is used with the questionnaire. When only the school system is known a letter explaining the purpose of the survey is personally addressed to the superintendent. The principal's cover letter, questionnaire, and business reply envelope are enclosed in an unsealed envelope with, "To the principal of Jane Doe, Teacher Number 12304567" typed on the front of it. The envelope is thus ready for the superintendent to route to the appropriate principal. It is also unsealed so that the superintendent is free to examine its contents.

For those teachers who are employed in the local city and county systems for whom the specific school assignments have been determined, questionnaires, business reply envelopes, and cover letters are sent directly to the principals. A separate cover letter, questionnaire, and reply envelope are included for each graduate if more than one are employed in a system or school. A manilla mailing envelope of appropriate size is used for all materials for a school or system if two or more graduates are employed.

Another facet of personalization occurs in the body of the cover letter in reference to the number of graduates. Basically, there are five introductory form letters used:

1. explanatory letter to superintendent employing only one graduate
2. explanatory letter to superintendent employing more than one graduates
3. cover letter to unknown principal
4. cover letter to known principal having one teacher
5. cover letter to known principal having two or more teachers

The relatively small number of nonrespondents after the first mailing and an even greater number of variations makes it more efficient in some cases to type the follow-up letters to fit the following circumstances:

1. superintendent employing only one graduate
2. superintendent employing more than one graduate, no forms returned
3. superintendent employing more than one graduate, one or more forms returned
4. unknown principal
5. known principal having one graduate
6. known principal having more than one graduate, no forms returned
7. known principal having more than one graduate, one or more forms returned

Cover letters to the superintendents include reference to State Department of Education records as the source of the information regarding the employment location of the graduates. In letters to the principals in the two local school systems it is acknowledged that the graduates were located with the cooperation of their respective school systems. Tacit approval of the survey is implied through the cooperation of the State Department and the school superintendents who either identify the specific schools (in the two local systems) or direct the questionnaires to the principals without identifying either the principals or schools to the College.

Cover letters are duplicated on letterhead stationery of bond quality. Although the body of the cover letters is duplicated, the inside address and greeting are typed as are the names and addresses on the envelopes. The signature on the form letter (that of the director of the Bureau of Educational Research and Service) is signed before duplication.

Postage

Questionnaires are mailed by first-class postage, using the University postage meter rather than stamps. Printed business reply envelopes are included in the initial mailing but not in the follow-up mailing.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire has been two or three pages in length and duplicated on colored paper. The first page contains basically demographic information (see Appendix). The second page consists of 14 rating scales on which the principal assesses the performance of the teacher, with the scales corresponding to the rating scales used by cooperating teachers and University coordinators during student teaching. Each of the 14 rating scales can be completed by circling a number from 1 to 10. The third page, when included, varied in content: in one survey principals were asked to indicate the importance of each of the 14 rating scales, and in another survey principals were asked about the importance of various reasons for hiring the teacher instead of another candidate.

Results

In the three years in which the survey has been conducted, response rates have ranged from 94% to 97%. One mail follow-up has been used each year with from 15% to 29% of the population being sent a second letter and questionnaire. Telephone calls have, on occasion, been placed to school principals in the two systems in which the principals were identified, but no more than three such calls were made.

Discussion

The procedures used have been satisfactory in producing a high response rate in each of three administrations of the survey with relatively low levels

of time and money being required because it is a mail survey utilizing only one follow-up. Several of the procedures are consistent with those associated with high response rates while others are not.

The population surveyed, school administrators, is one of professionals characterized by high levels of literacy, qualities which have been associated with a tendency to return questionnaires (Fowler, 1984; Sudman & Bradburn, 1984). Return rates of 71% to 88% are not unusual for teachers (Sudman & Bradham, 1984, p. 34). University sponsorship is also conducive to high return rates (Baumgartner & Heberlein, 1984, p. 66; Sudman & Bradburn, 1984, p. 36).

Principals are asked to rate the teachers near the end of the school year. The timing is probably advantageous because school administrators may have already had to perform personnel evaluations for the system (Altschuld & Lower, 1984).

A minimum amount of time is required to complete the questionnaire since the questionnaire is relatively short and there are no open-ended items. In addition, confidentiality is assured. Both conditions have been associated with positive effects (Altschuld & Lower, 1984). In some cases, the respondent's identity remains unknown to the College.

Other factors conducive to high return rates which are characteristic of this survey are: personalization and follow-up mailing (Dillman, Dillman, & Makela, 1984; Yu & Cooper, 1983); use of multiple cover letters and central office support (Altschuld & Lower, 1984, p. 11); high quality paper, inside address added, address typed onto envelopes on both initial and follow-up mailings, and typed follow-up letter (Dillman, Dillman & Makela, 1984, p. 55-56). Salience, or importance of questionnaire contents to respondents (Altschuld & Lower, 1984) would have to be inferred but may be a factor since

improving the preparation of teacher candidates would ultimately benefit the principals in the future. There may be another element somewhat related to both salience and the nature of the population in that requesting the principal to do the rating accords recognition of his experience and judgment.

Procedures used which are contrary to existing research or theory in producing high response rates are: use of mail survey rather than telephone or personal interview methods (Altschuld & Lower, 1984; Yu & Cooper, 1983); lack of preliminary notification, absence of offer of premiums or rewards, promised or prepaid incentives (Yu & Cooper, 1983); letters not individually signed in blue ink, cover letters not typed originals, use of business reply envelope rather than stamped return envelope, conventional size of stationery, follow-up sent three to four weeks after first mailing instead of sooner, follow-up in letter rather than postcard format, follow-up letter not hand signed (Dillman, Dillman, & Makela, 1984, pp. 55-56).

Much of the research on survey methodology has been conducted in regard to public opinion polls or attitudinal marketing research. It is possible that the nature of this survey makes many of those findings inapplicable to follow-up surveys. Berdie and Anderson (1974) suggest using "varying tactics for different samples and studies" (p. 53). It could well be that new answers must be sought for specific situations rather than assuming the generalizability of current research findings, many of which are already plagued by inconsistencies, such as in the areas of questionnaire length and class of postage (Baumgartner & Heberlein, 1984). Therefore, no claim is made as to the applicability of these procedures to other populations or types of surveys. Other researchers are encouraged to adopt or adapt such elements of the design as seem appropriate for their particular situations.

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APPENDIX

TEACHER EDUCATION FOLLOW-UP SURVEY - PRINCIPALS

BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND SERVICE
College of Education
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to each item on this questionnaire. Read each item carefully and record your responses as indicated. Ignore the numbers in parentheses; these are for keypunching purposes only.

SECTION 1. These items request information about the TEACHER who graduated from UTK in 1982-83 whose name appears on the cover letter.

A. Teacher's level of certification: (cc4)

___ 1. Kindergarten through grade 3
___ 2. Grades 1-8
___ 3. Grades 7-12
___ 4. Grades 9-12
___ 5. Grades 1-12
___ 6. Other (Please Specify)

B. Area (or areas) in which teacher is currently teaching: (cc5-10)

___ 1. Kindergarten
___ 2. Elementary
___ 3. Agriculture
___ 4. Art
___ 5. Business
___ 6. Deaf Education
___ 7. Distributive Ed.
___ 8. English
___ 9. Foreign Language
___ 10. Health
___ 11. Home Economics
___ 12. Industrial Arts
___ 13. Mathematics
___ 14. Music
___ 15. Physical Education
___ 16. Science
___ 17. Social Studies
___ 18. Special Education
___ 19. Other (Please specify) _____

C. Is the Teacher certified in the area or areas in which he/she is currently teaching? (cc11)

___ 1. Yes
___ 2. No
___ 3. Certified in one or more but not in all

D. List area in which teacher is teaching but not certified _____ (cc12-15)

E. Reason(s) for lack of certification in teaching area (check one or more):

___ 1. Difficulty in obtaining certification from State Department of Education. (cc16)
___ 2. Still completing certification requirements (cc17)
___ 3. Inadequate undergraduate advising (cc18)
___ 4. Teacher certified in only one area (cc19)
___ 5. Uncertified area is not the major teaching assignment for the teacher (cc20)
___ 6. Difficult (or unable) to obtain certified teacher due to geographic location (cc21)
___ 7. Other _____ (cc22)

F. Teacher's gender: (cc23)

___ 1. Male
___ 2. Female

SECTION II. The following teacher characteristics are believed to have an influence on teaching effectiveness. Please circle one number for each characteristic representing your rating of the teacher compared with other first-year teachers with whom you have worked. A rating of "Good" on the scale indicates that the characteristic being considered is acceptable and that the teacher is performing effectively. The numbers correspond to the following scale descriptions:

SUPERIOR:	VERY GOOD:	GOOD:	MARGINAL:	UNACCEPTABLE:
Reveals qualities found in only the most effective and creative teachers.	Clearly above average. Goes well beyond meeting basic requirements.	Acceptable, respectable performance. Meets basic requirements.	Acceptability only marginal; needs improvement.	Below minimum standards for certification.
1 2	3 4	5 6	7 8	9 10

A. Description of teacher's teaching personality. Proper perspective of teaching-learning situation is maintained by teacher; teacher remains "open" and flexible.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc24)
B. Apparent health and vitality.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc25)
C. Voice and language usage.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc26)
D. Ability to work cooperatively with other staff members.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc27)
E. Ability to profit from feedback supplied by observational techniques.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc28)
F. Ability to make realistic decisions; has maturity of judgment.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc29)
G. Has an understanding and a working knowledge of content in teaching areas; understands underlying principles.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc30)
H. Competence in effectively preparing for lessons.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc31)
I. Classroom Management	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc32)
J. Ability to perform a variety of critical teaching tasks as identified by analysis of teaching techniques (leading discussions, giving directions, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc33)
K. Competency in evaluating students (use of teacher-made tests, reasonable standards of performance, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc34)
L. Ability to motivate learners.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc35)
M. Description of teacher's attitudes toward children. Teacher is fair and just in dealing with pupils; is responsive to pupils and takes a "clinical" approach to misbehavior.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc36)
N. Commitment to teaching.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	(cc37)

SECTION III. What were the major factors in your decision to hire this person rather than someone else who applied for the same position? (Check all which apply.)

(cc38) _____ A. Prior experience with the person during his/her undergraduate program

(cc39) _____ B. Strength of academic record

(cc40) _____ C. Strength of recommendations

(cc41) _____ D. Strength of student teaching evaluation

(cc42) _____ E. Strength of test scores (National Teachers Examination)

(cc43) _____ F. Recommendation of someone within your school

(cc44) _____ G. Recommendation of someone within your school system

(cc45) _____ H. Personal knowledge of the person or family as community members

(cc46) _____ I. Personal appearance

(cc47) _____ J. Ability to communicate during interview

(cc48) _____ K. Ability to communicate in writing

(cc49) _____ L. Other _____

Is there one or more factors which were critical in choosing this person?

(cc50) _____1. Yes _____2. No

(cc51) If so, which ones? _____

Comments: